DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 480 075 CG 032 648

AUTHOR	Roeber, Edward
TITLE	Steps in the Right Direction: Reporting Assessment Results to Students, Parents, School Board Members, and the Media.
PUB DATE	2003-08-00
NOTE	26p.; In: Measuring Up: Assessment Issues for Teachers, Counselors, and Administrators; see CG 032 608.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Accountability; *Educational Assessment; *Educational Testing; *Outcomes of Education; *Stakeholders; *Test Results

ABSTRACT

Using test results to improve instruction is vital to improving the education system, but equally important is to report results to other stakeholders. These stakeholders include the students who took the test, their parents or guardians, other parents in the school or district, the local school board, and the public at large. Effective reporting is essential if the data have been and will be used to improve student learning. The purpose of this chapter is to describe some ways in which educators can report assessment results to various audiences so that they build public confidence and support, strengthen the parent's role in schooling, and help students learn about the challenging standards being assessed. (Contains 11 references.) (Author)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 480 075

Steps in the Right Direction: Reporting Assessment Results to Students, Parents, School Board Members, and the Media

By
Edward Roeber

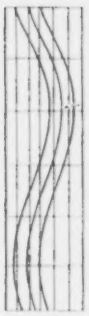
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CG032648



Chapter 40
Steps in the Right Direction
Reporting Assessment Results to Students, Parents, School Board Members, and the Media

Edward Roeber

Using test results to improve instruction is vital to improving our education system, but equally important is to report results to other stakeholders. These stakeholders include the students who took the test, their parents or guardians, other parents in the school or district, the local school board, and the public at large (Frechtling & Myerberg, 1983). Effective reporting is essential if the data have been and will be used to improve student learning (Gucwa & Mastie, 1989; Roeber & Carr, 1983, Roeber & Mastie, 1999).

The purpose of this chapter is to describe some ways in which educators can report assessment results to various audiences so that they build public confidence and support, strengthen the parent's role in schooling, and help students learn about the challenging standards being assessed.

Reporting Assessment Results to Students

This section addresses reporting assessment results to students: why the results should be reported, how the reporting should be handled, and the resources that are available for this process.

Why Results Should Be Reported to Students

Students want to know how they did on the assessment. In fact, letting them know how well they did, as well as how they will be helped to improve, can go a long way toward motivating them to take the assessment seriously and give it their best effort, particularly if they are informed of the teacher's intentions to use the results in advance of taking the test. Experienced teachers know that the feedback they provide to students can help motivate students to work hard. If they respond to each piece of student work—every homework assignment,

every quiz, every paper, and every test—promptly and thoroughly, students will tend to give their work their best effort.

Another advantage of providing feedback to students is that it increases the likelihood that the student will remain actively engaged in learning. If they know which standards and skills they have achieved and which they still need to improve, they are more likely to work on the skills they lack. When this feedback is communicated to them as part of a goal-setting process in which the student plays a role, the student is even more likely to take ownership of the problem and participate in the solution to it.

How Results Should Be Reported to Students

A two-step process is recommended for reporting large-scale assessment results to students. First, the teacher should provide an overview of the assessment results to all students in the class. Then, the teacher should provide interpretation and goal-setting sessions for students individually.

During the group interpretation process, the teacher should

- remind students of the large-scale assessment they took
- explain the purposes for taking that test
- inform students that the results have been returned
- explain the general types of uses to which the district, school, and classroom results will be put
- describe how the teacher will assist students and parents in interpreting and understanding the results
- explain how to read the individual report of results (if reports of results are distributed to students in the group setting)

In the subsequent individual follow-up sessions, teachers should help students understand the significance of how well they performed on the test and how the information will be used to plan instruction for the immediate future. The teacher should adhere to the following guidelines for each session:

- Focus on the standards and skills the student has or has not met or learned, not on the number of items answered correctly or whether the student passed or failed the test.
- Encourage and reinforce both achievement and effort shown.
- Discourage comparisons among students, emphasizing instead the need for each individual to achieve the standards and skills assessed.

- Develop a plan of action to address the educational needs of the student.
- Discuss how the student can participate in planning and carrying out the plan to address these needs.

In most settings, these meetings will result in a specific but informal agreement about the steps to take to assist each student. In some cases, however, the teacher and student will need to create formal agreements about what services will be provided and the manner in which these services will be provided. This agreement should include a description of responsibilities, schedules, and signatures.

This two-step process, using both a group report and individual student follow-up sessions, will work in most settings. For example, at the elementary level, the classroom teacher should be able to carry out both types of meetings. At the secondary level, it may be advisable for a school counselor or principal to conduct the group meeting, perhaps as an assembly. Classroom teachers, school counselors, or both might hold the individual student meetings, depending on whether the likely plan will include remedial instruction in existing classes, or the student will be asked to enroll in different or additional courses in the subject area assessed (particularly if the student is not taking a class in the area assessed).

Resources to Use in the Reporting Process

A variety of materials and resources are available for teachers and counselors to use during one or both of the steps in reporting the results of large-scale assessments to students. The following materials are useful in planning the group report:

- the explanatory materials returned with the large-scale assessment results, particularly for the individual student report (it may be helpful to duplicate for the students the section of these materials that explains how to read and report the results)
- information on the district and school plans for using the assessment results for instructional review and improvement
- information on how and when parents will receive the individual student results
- information on who will hold the individual student sessions and when they will be held, with a schedule for students to use when signing up for their individual sessions

The following materials may be helpful for conducting the individual student sessions:

- descriptions of the standards and skills assessed
- a sample copy of the test, if use of the test is permitted during interpretive sessions following testing (in some secure testing programs, this is not permitted)
- the student's individual report of the assessment results (a copy for both the teacher and the student)
- written plans for helping the student learn the skills assessed

Summary

No one at school or in the home can work to improve the performance of a student on the standards and skills measured by the large-scale assessment program unless the individual student actively participates in planning the learning activities. In order for that to occur, students must learn specifically how they did, the significance of their performance, and how they can improve. The large-scale assessment program can provide one important source of information, as can other types of information about the student. Specific feedback on performance is a vital part of the process of improving student performance.

Reporting Assessment Results to Parents and Guardians

The emphasis of this section is on reporting assessment results to parents and guardians, both those of students who were assessed and of students who attend the same school as the students assessed. This section addresses why and how the results should be reported to parents, who should report the results, the resources available to assist in reporting, and strategies for accurate and efficient reporting. (Throughout, I use *parent* to signify the parent, guardian, or other designated caregiver of the student.)

Why Results Should Be Reported to Parents

All parents want to know how well the students in their child's school performed, what the school will be doing to improve instruction, and, for the parents of the students who were assessed, what the school will do to help their child do better (Barber, 1992). Are their children exceeding, meeting, or failing to meet the performance standards set for the assessments? The standards and skills measured by the assessment program are often the most critical to the academic success

of students, a fact that many parents already know. The assessment results will give parents one indication of how well students are meeting these standards. Sharing results with parents is an excellent way of telling them how well their children are learning the most important skills schools are trying to teach.

Parental concern and involvement are crucial in helping students learn. Research has shown that parental involvement in academic achievement is a critical factor in promoting better student performance (Coleman, 1983). Sharing results with parents can enable cooperative planning by teachers, parents, and students to improve student performance.

Parents also want to know how the school and the school district are doing. In many states, freedom of information acts require that existing information about public schools, such as school and school district test summaries, be made available or be released to the public. Wise educators realize that large-scale assessment programs generate considerable public interest. These educators plan for the release of the results through formal public presentations as well as written reports sent home to parents or included with school newsletters. Formal public presentations reach those parents who do not visit the school yet are interested in how well the school is performing.

How Results Should Be Reported

By taking steps to report test results directly to parents, rather than relying on the news media, schools have a unique opportunity to tell their own story—including what will be done with the results—and perhaps reduce the opportunity for misinterpretation or misrepresentation of the results. The importance of developing an accurate initial school interpretation of the results cannot be overemphasized. A school should share the test results, and the school's interpretation of them, with parents as soon as possible after receiving the information. Being the first party to report to parents the status and progress of student performance is an excellent way to improve public relations at the building level.

Schools should plan to report student and school assessment results. Three activities are involved in this planning: (a) staff preparation; (b) review and interpretation of the test results; and (c) development of an action plan. Sharing test results effectively with parents and guardians, which can be considered the fourth step in this planning sequence, requires careful preliminary work. When the meaning of the results has not been determined and plans for use have

not been developed, it becomes difficult for staff members to report the results in a meaningful way, without sounding defensive or indifferent about the results. Through careful planning, staff can convey a thoughtful, concerned attitude that parents will appreciate and support.

The school or teacher should emphasize the following items when communicating individual results to parents and guardians:

- the individual results themselves
- the relationship between the assessment results and other student achievement information
- the plan of action proposed for the student
- the parents' or guardians' role in helping implement the plan

The plan should be the one that the teacher and student have developed during the process of examining the results. Each individual student report should emphasize both the strengths and the weaknesses uncovered, the extent to which this report supports or contradicts other information about the student, and how the teacher and parents or guardians can work together to help the student make improvements.

The school or teacher should emphasize the following items when reporting group results:

- the group results themselves
- the relationship of the assessment results to other information about the group's achievement
- the school's proposed plans of action

In developing the official school interpretation, school staff members should

- reach an understanding of what the assessment results mean
- relate the assessment results to other achievement results, to derive a more complete picture of student performance
- relate all performance information to the instructional program that the school is implementing

Who Should Share the Results?

In elementary schools, the classroom teacher typically bears the responsibility of reporting individual student results. At the middle school or high school levels, this responsibility may be carried out by classroom teachers or by guidance counselors, often the latter if the student is not enrolled in a class in the area assessed. The school results are typically reported by the building principal, the counselor, department heads, or others designated to carry out these responsibilities.

Resources to Use in the Reporting Process

Each assessment program will produce somewhat different resources for reporting assessment results, such as any of the following examples:

- reports of individual student assessment results
- reports for parents of individual student assessment results
- school summaries of assessment results
- materials for explaining and interpreting these reports
- sample or actual test booklets to illustrate the test that students were given

Four Parent Reporting Strategies

There are four different ways in which to report the assessment results to parents. The strategies may be used as is, or be combined or adapted to fit the individual needs of the school or district. Each requires preliminary preparation, including familiarizing oneself with the assessment program, reviewing the reports of results, analyzing and interpreting the results, setting student goals, and developing a plan of action.

Individual Parent-Teacher Conferences

The parent-teacher conference is the most desirable means of reporting individual results to parents. Its single disadvantage is that it reaches only those parents willing to attend and must be supplemented by other means for the remaining parents. Its advantages are many:

- providing for two-way communication between teachers and parents
- personalizing the test results
- personalizing the plan of action
- getting parents actively involved in the education of their children

Individual Student Report Sent Home

If conferences cannot be arranged, the individual student report should be mailed or sent home with the student. A cover letter should explain the assessment program and the assessment report for parents, summarize the student's strengths and weaknesses as indicated by the results, outline any necessary plans for remediation, and encourage the parents to contact the school for further information.

Sending the student report home is far less desirable than holding an in-person conference, but it may be the only open avenue of communication between school and home. Even though it may be necessary to report results in this manner, the school should still provide an individual interpretation of the results and not just send the report home without any interpretation.

Parent Group Meeting

An open meeting for parents enables reporting of the school assessment data to both the parents of students tested and the parents of students who were not involved in the assessment program but who will be or have been.

Teachers or counselors can share individual student assessment results as a follow-up activity after the formal meeting. A school can either mail the parent a copy of the individual assessment results with an invitation to come to the meeting, or distribute the parent copy of individual assessment results to parents at the meeting (with individual parent-teacher conferences following the presentation of the school results at the group meeting).

The group meeting has several advantages:

- It provides parents with a clear understanding of the assessment program, such as why the tests are given, what is assessed, and how the results are reported and used.
- It creates a setting in which to discuss the overall instructional plan and achievement goals of the school.
- It provides a vehicle for putting the assessment results into the larger context of the total school program.
- The individual results and improvement plans can be put into the larger context of school improvement plans.
- The group meeting can involve the entire staff.

A disadvantage is that it reaches only those parents who attend the meeting. The opportunity for two-way communication, however, makes the meeting the most desirable method of sharing the assessment results with parents of the total school population.

Newsletter or Letter to Parents

The school assessment results can be communicated to parents and the school community at large through a prepared article or short

written report printed in school newsletters, parent newsletters, or letters to parents. The written document should be clear, concise, and written for the layperson, using a minimum of educational or assessment jargon. It should address the following points:

- an overview of the school results, findings, and recommendations
- factors affecting the school results
- uses of the results at the classroom or school level
- how individual student results will be made available—either from classroom teachers or via the mail
- what the school is doing to improve achievement in the areas of identified weakness

Summary

Reporting individual student and school assessment results to parents offers a unique opportunity to review student progress, set goals, and elicit parent support and participation. Schools should consider the best strategies or combination of strategies for reporting results: through parent-teacher conferences, by sending reports home, through a combination of group and individual meetings, or by using a school newsletter or general letter to parents.

Reporting Assessment Results to the School Board

One of the important audiences for assessment results is the local board of education. As the entity responsible for the education of students, this group has a vital interest in the performance of students on the assessment. School boards expect school administrators to provide them with information in a timely manner and in a format they can easily understand. They have many issues to consider and a great deal of information to absorb in a relatively short period of time. Most board members are laypeople, albeit with considerable interest and experience in education. They need help in understanding the assessment program, its purposes, it uses, and its reports if they are to provide the types of support needed to help schools and students improve. Hence, reporting to the school board is an important step in the overall assessment process.

Why Results Should Be Reported to the School Board

The natural tension that exists between local educators and their school board often makes reporting assessment results to the board an

onerous task. The pressures coming from the media and outspoken parents make reporting even more sensitive. Having a prepared, systematic plan for using and reporting the assessment results can help to make reporting a routine activity and remove much of the accompanying anxiety. The ideas presented here are tied to the principle espoused throughout this document that reporting the assessment results, and planning for their use, are two aspects of a single process, not separate and unrelated activities (Caswell & Roeber, 1983a).

It is ideal to initiate reporting of assessment results *before the assessment results are returned to the school district.* Providing background information will help the school board understand the purposes of the assessment program before they focus on the actual assessment scores. Explaining the assessment before reporting the results clarifies for board members that the purpose of the assessment program is not simply to provide box-score comparative data, but to provide a means to help students learn and to assist schools as they fine-tune their instructional programs.

Planning a Reporting Program

An organized plan for reporting assessment results and related information to the local school board and also to district staff and administrators helps to manage staff time efficiently and to minimize surprises. To develop a reporting plan, identify important school events and activities, in advance if possible, then determine potential audiences and possible reporting activities for each event. Assign responsibilities for preparing and giving the reports and provide appropriate schedules.

Three different types of reports should form the basis of the reporting campaign (Roeber, Donovan & Cole, 1980). The first report to the school board should be the background report. This report should be done before the results are available so that the board can focus on the purposes of the assessment program and the uses to which the results will be put. The report should explain the purposes for the assessment program; provide facts about who will be assessed, and when and how they will be assessed; and indicate when the results will become available and how the results will be used (e.g., at the student, classroom, school, and school district levels) and reported (e.g., to parents, students, educators, and the public).

The second report to the school board is the report of assessment results. This is the report that will be the most challenging to prepare. It should contain the district-level scores, the building-level scores, and state and national scores (if available); an interpretation of the scores

from the perspective of each school, the district, and the state or nation (if available); information on how these assessment results are similar to other available achievement information and an explanation of any differences; and a description of how the results will be used at the school level and reported at the school and district levels.

The third report to the school board is a follow-up report on the information provided in the first two reports. Either the background report or the results report may contain statements about steps the schools or the district intend to follow after the data are received and reported; it is therefore important to provide periodic follow-up reports to the school board, giving updates on the progress in using the assessment information at the student, classroom, or school levels. This will help ensure that the school board focuses more on the *improvement* purposes of the assessment program and less on the *comparative* uses often made of the assessment information.

The Background Report

The background report provides the opportunity to discuss assessment without any assessment results to distract the board members' attention. The purposes of the assessment program can be described in some detail independent of natural concerns about whether scores are up or down, or better or worse than neighboring districts or the state or nation. In planning the background report, include the following four parts:

Basic facts about the assessment program. Include facts such as the grades at which assessment takes place, the subjects assessed, the nature of the assessments—standards-based, norm-referenced, and so forth—and the types of assessment items used (perhaps with released samples of each item type).

Purposes of the assessment program. Emphasize the purposes of the program at the student, classroom, school, and district levels. Mention any purposes the board members may assume are relevant to the assessment but that are not intended uses of the information.

Uses of the assessment results. Describe how an individual classroom teacher might use the results, as well as how a school improvement team might use the school results, to help board members see that the primary purpose for the program is instructional improvement.

District reporting plans. Conclude with the district plan for reporting the assessment results to the school board, parents, educators, and news media. Let board members know when additional board reports will be planned. Finally, let the board know how and when parents of the students assessed will receive their children's results.

The Report of Assessment Results

The second of the three reports that each district should make to its board is the report of assessment results. This report is crucial in establishing what meaning the assessment results have for the district, the schools, and the students. This report to the school board often becomes a report to the news media, who may be attending the meeting or may regularly receive written school board reports.

The results report has four basic parts:

1. Review of assessment program information: A review of the information covered in the background report will serve to remind board members of basic information about the assessment program and its primary purposes.
2. Report of district results: This is the meat of the results report and should contain answers to the following questions:
   - How did we do this year?
   - Has performance improved over recent years in each of the areas assessed?
   - If so, why? If not, why not?

   The percentages of students achieving a proficient level or passing the assessment are the easiest numbers to understand. The report of results should focus on these numbers first when answering the questions listed above.

   If additional reporting levels are used (e.g., advanced or novice), or if results are disaggregated or reported by skill area or content standard (or subunits within these), these numbers can also be reported, but they should not have the same prominence in the report as the percentages of students who passed or achieved proficiency. One way to report additional result information is to follow the overall presentation of results with additional sections that focus briefly on these additional data. Alternatively, these data can be used to answer particular questions as they are asked. For example, in responding to the question about

improvement, the report might mention that although the percentage of students at the proficient level or above has not changed much, the percentage of students in the bottom performance level (e.g., novice) has declined sharply.

In reporting changes in student performance, it is important to be modest in claims of improvement (what goes up could well go down in the future) and to be open in acknowledging declines in student performance (It is better to tell the story yourself and provide appropriate explanations than to have board members or the media discover and interpret the declines.) Although the reasons for improvement or decline in scores may not be known, the declines may encourage a more detailed review to determine the causes. If so, the plans for this review should be mentioned in the report.

The report of assessment results should downplay comparisons among districts or among schools within the district because these comparisons can be misleading. Such comparisons too easily get translated into success and failure judgments of the entire school, the school program, and the school faculty, based on only a small piece of the total picture.

3. Implications of the results: Answer the "so what?" questions clearly, concisely, and honestly. School teams should be involved in developing interpretations of the results and could be involved in reporting these interpretations to the school board. They have firsthand knowledge of student capabilities and what students have been taught, and they can describe the implications of the results for individual students (in summary form) and for the school's instructional program.
4. Plans to use the results: This section of the results report can describe each school's plans to use the results, as well as the district plans to coordinate these efforts, particularly across schools. In addition, because the report to the board may also be the first public release of the information to the news media, the district's and schools' plans to release the results to parents and other citizens should be highlighted.

Follow-up Reports

After reporting the results and the plans for using them, it is logical to report back to the school board throughout the year on the progress made in using the results to improve learning opportunities for students. The following suggested topics are useful in these follow-up reports:

- specific areas of need selected as priority for review
- results of the instructional review process
- new instruction or services contemplated as a result of the instructional review
- planned follow-up assessments of students or schools after remediation
- special activities (awards, summer programs, Saturday programs, and so forth) planned as a result of assessment

Multiple follow-up reports may be used to highlight the different activities taking place in different schools, or in schools at different levels. The follow-up reports may be in writing only, or may involve teachers, administrators, parents, or students presenting some aspect of the program.

Summary

Although the model presented here is not the only possible approach to presenting results, it is effective in focusing the attention of school board members on the instructional uses of the assessment program and in avoiding inappropriate uses of the data. Remember: Assessment results are only as good as the uses to which they are put. An effective plan for reporting results to the school board must be accompanied by appropriate efforts to use the results to review and revise curriculum and instruction as needed.

Reporting Assessment Results to the Public

Reporting, or more accurately, *explaining* the results of assessment programs to the public, via the news media, is the focus of this section. The approach presented here emphasizes once again the connection between the assessment result reports and plans for using the results. As was the case with reporting to the school board, reports to the public should include information about how the results will be used to improve instruction. This will not only make the data more meaningful, it will convey the equally important aspect that the school district is actively

taking steps to improve teaching and learning, thereby building public support for the improvements being sought (Caswell & Roeber, 1983b). Included in this section is information about

- contacting reporters
- formatting data
- organizing the information
- developing the district reporting program

Getting Started

A majority of citizens in most school districts do not have school-age children, so they do not have much direct contact with local educators. Although parents see the schools in action and hear about them in many ways, average citizens form impressions of the schools based largely on what they hear or see in the news media. Because the media help shape public opinion, educators should work closely with representatives of the news media to ensure they provide the public with accurate and complete information about schools.

Keep in mind, too, that there are other ways of reaching the public. District newsletters and school letters sent to all citizens are just two additional means. The focus of this chapter is on reporting to the public, not reporting to the news media, although it does focus on how to work with news media in reporting the results.

Working with news reporters, especially when presenting assessment results from external programs, may seem difficult to do well. With some preplanning and a few basic ideas, however, school personnel can confidently share assessment results with the public through the media (Perlman, 1985). Reporting to the public should include the following steps:

1. Plan for the use of data. Using scores and reporting scores are closely related activities, and both need to be planned for at the beginning of the school year, regardless of when the administration of the assessment and the reporting of results take place. This will help ensure that the important use and reporting activities take place throughout the entire school year, not just when assessment results are received.

   It is easier to report the results when school officials know what they mean and what will be done as a consequence. Early reports will help the news media understand the purpose of the assessment program, how the results are used to benefit students, and why using the

scores for comparative purposes is not the most important use of the assessment results. Reporting information about how the results will be used to strengthen the instructional program and address student weaknesses addresses the "so what?" aspect of reporting the results.

2. Determine purpose and goals. At the beginning of the year, determine the purposes for communication of assessment results. Before testing even starts, district personnel need to have a clear understanding of what it is they want to accomplish by reporting results. Some districts are using assessment reporting as a way to begin a yearlong district information program. Reporting assessment results can be an ongoing effort that begin long before the day the results are released.

Successful school communicators begin the reporting process by explaining the purposes and limitations of the assessment program before the results are received. Then they present the results later with other important measures of school district accomplishments, provide follow-up reports on their progress toward implementing the plans outlined in the previous reports, and wrap up the year by evaluating the success of their efforts.

Selecting reporting goals is also helpful. Such goals need not be limited to the assessment program. These assessment reporting goals might include the following ideas:

- making people in the community aware of the proper use of the assessment results
- encouraging teachers and school administrators to use the assessment results
- convincing the public that educators are concerned about student achievement
- convincing people to support the schools, particularly as educators strive to make improvements in them

3. Think ahead. Designing a district reporting program involves addressing a number of important issues:
   - Who needs to know what assessment information?
   - What steps can be taken to ensure that those who need to know get the information?
   - What are the different possible ways to present the information, and which ones work best for each

audience?

- What steps can be taken to ensure that distributed information is complete, covers major points, and is understandable to those who know very little about the proper uses and limitations of the assessment program?
- What additional information is needed during the year?
- Has the communication program accomplished its intended purposes?

Answers to the following questions may help clarify the previous questions:

- What information about assessment do typical members of the public currently possess?
- Are their interpretations of the information accurate?
- What is their attitude toward this and other assessment programs?
- Who else is talking to them about assessment, and what are those voices saying?
- How does the audience feel about the source of the information, such as the test publisher or school district? What is their level of trust?

4. Decide whose job it is to report to the public. It is also helpful to decide who within the school district will have primary responsibility for organizing the communications program and working with the news media. Ideally, one person who has the time to do the planning and preparation activities recommended in this chapter should be responsible for working with the media.

   If the district has a public information director, that person should coordinate coverage of the results of testing just like any other report. This communications person, the assessment director, and the instructional director should work as a team—the public information director arranging for and hosting briefing sessions for reporters; the assessment director interpreting the results and answering questions about the results reports; and the instructional director adding how the students assessed will be helped, how school instructional programs will be reviewed and improved, and how results will be reported

to parents. The public information director writes the news release about the results, but the assessment and instructional staff provide the content for the release. In small districts without a person who regularly handles the media, one person will have to handle all reporting tasks. This may be an assistant superintendent, a building principal, a guidance counselor, or perhaps the superintendent.

Developing Contacts

To develop a list of news media persons you wish to release information to, begin by personally contacting each newspaper, radio, and television station in the school district area. This contact should be made long before the first report is to be released. The initial contact at the newspaper will probably be an editor. Ask whether one reporter has been assigned to the "education beat." If not, the contact person may continue to be the editor you first contacted. The contact may also be a news reporter who regularly attends school board meetings.

Remember the radio and television stations that serve your community. Even if the district is just one of many in a station's service area, broadcasters may appreciate a brief report of the assessment results. Direction of the news in a radio or television station usually rests with the news director. In the absence of someone in that position, contact the program director. After establishing contact, ask when it would be convenient to stop by for a visit. If you're too far away to drop in for a visit, ask how and in what format the written report of assessment results should be provided.

If you make a get-acquainted visit, keep it brief. Editors and reporters are usually pressed for time. Ask about deadlines and how copy should be presented to them. Let them know when the assessment results are expected and that you will contact them again when the information is available. Arrange a mutually convenient time for a background session prior to the release of the results. Personal contact will help media representatives accurately report what will be a complex news story.

Later, when the results are released, provide reporters with detailed reports and charts or graphs. The press will cover the main points, and radio and television media will summarize. Don't be disappointed if the media do not carry all of the report. What is said or printed, and how the message is absorbed by readers and listeners, is really more important than the level of detail of the message.

Don't forget to follow up. Whether the media report is positive or negative, provide the reporter with a reaction to what was said or printed. Try to emphasize the positive aspects of the report; mention, but do not dwell on, the negative aspects. Find out, if necessary, how communication could have been clearer. This type of follow-up leads to better reporting each year. These contacts can help in other reporting activities as well.

The Background Report

If reporters are given assessment results without any advance preparation, their attention may naturally focus on the comparative nature of the results: which district scored the highest or lowest, which school buildings outperformed others, whose results were most surprising, and so forth. That is why many school districts, after making preliminary contact with editors and news reporters, will arrange a session to report background information prior to the actual distribution of assessment results. Such a session, held shortly before assessment results are to be reported, might be held when testing is taking place (a newsworthy event in itself) or a few weeks before the results are released. This session provides the news media with background copy for their advance story on the upcoming release of the test data, and provides an opportunity to focus on the real purposes of the assessment and uses of the results. Reporters should be told the purpose of the assessment, what it measures, the scoring methods, how to read and understand the test reports, keys to interpretation, and how the results will be used by teachers and other district personnel.

The Results Report

School and district personnel will undoubtedly spend many hours analyzing the assessment results and preparing the written reports of results. The written report will usually be several pages long, with graphs and charts attached. When presenting the results to the school board, some of these graphs and charts will be used to convey the results, showing the overall performance of students at each grade assessed, the breakdown of performance in several different ways, and analysis of performance over time, if available. Listening to this extensive presentation, media representatives may ask, "Could you tell me in a sentence or two what the results mean?" The presenter, who may have talked for half an hour or longer, may be taken aback; however, the reporter is not trying to disregard a thorough or complex story, nor show disrespect. He or she may study the report thoroughly before

writing the article, but the request to "boil it down" is a request to find a summary that provides a quick and accurate overview of the test results.

Good communicators are prepared to give reporters the basic information they will need in order to develop the "lead," or introductory paragraph for their story. In fact, a well-written press release gives an overview of the salient facts and outcomes at the beginning and then fills in the details. This type of report is different from those we normally write, where we give all the background first, then the big picture: our conclusions. Plans to report individual student results to parents should also be presented to reporters, because if they mention this in their stories, parents are more likely to learn that the assessment results are available to them and request to see the results.

The complete display of the assessment data that has been prepared for the school board should also be distributed to the news media. To assist the news media in focusing on a few pieces of the overall story, however, the written report should emphasize just a few of the graphs and charts that best support the key points of the story. Graphs should be designed to develop the theme of year-to-year comparisons, comparisons of skill areas, and district-to-state comparisons. Discourage reporters from comparing schools or districts to each other because these comparisons are unfair and do not promote the types of school improvement activities that lead to improved student performance.

It may be helpful to brief reporters on the assessment report shortly before its release at either a separate news conference or a school board meeting. This will enable district personnel to review results and answer questions before the actual report is released. It will permit reporters to better understand the results as well.

Follow-up Reports

When follow-up reports are scheduled for presentation to the school board, news releases describing the types of activities that occurred after the assessment results had been analyzed should also be prepared for the news media. These reports are most effective when they feature tangible activities, such as the purchase and use of new instructional materials, the attendance of teachers at professional development events (and how teachers will be using the new skills they have learned), and so forth.

Hints for Working With the Media

In addition to the advice given thus far, the following hints will help educators work successfully with the news media:

- Begin all reporting on assessment with a quick review of the purposes and limitations of the assessment program.
- Make sure the information given will help the reporter or editor understand and interpret the report.
- Use plain English.
- Be very clear about what it is that the school district intends to do with the assessment results. Be direct.
- Don't try to cover up results that aren't as good as you would like them to be. Don't try to diminish their importance. Don't try to blame others for the lower-than-desired performance. The public will view negatively any attempts to avoid accepting the results.
- Give reporters a list of the student performance measures used in the school district and a summary of how well students did on each of these measures.
- Help the media paint a more complete picture of student performance by giving them data they can use to do so. These may include longitudinal comparisons, district test or college entrance test performance, and other measures of students, such as the number gaining entrance to college, the military, or gainful employment. These data help place the assessment results in a broader context.
- At least once a year, carefully evaluate the communications program. Do reporters, parents, and other citizens now understand assessment? Which of the several ways used to try to reach this audience seemed to work the best? Which conveyed the most information most accurately? Did the press refrain from making unfair comparisons this year?
- Don't surprise anyone. Let the school staff, administration, school board, public, and press know ahead of time that the test results are to be released.
- Cover the inside first. Provide a simple but clear interpretation for all insiders—those building administrators who will be carrying the message to their staff members. Prepare the graphs and charts they will need to assist them. Provide the tools teachers will need to assist them in understanding and using the test data.

- Practice audience identification. Ask yourself four simple questions when you start to plan for the release of testing information: Who needs to know this? When should the identified audiences first hear the information? What's the best way to get this information to each audience? What will each audience be most interested in?

Help the Media Interpret to the Public

Develop a positive working relationship with the news media who will have the job of digesting and reporting your results to the public. Help them as needed to understand and develop an interpretation of the results.

Start with a simple explanation. When you begin the public disclosure of the results, explain the purpose of the assessment program, what the media can and can't reveal about schools, and how the information will be used.

Sum up what the results mean. Make it a point to compare this year's district results with last year's, as long as the programs are comparable. If they aren't, make sure to point this out, including simple explanations of how they are different. See if you can relate these assessment results to other tests given in your school district. Explain in simple terms what the large-scale or national comparisons mean and what they don't mean. Try comparing your district results to what you thought your district should achieve. Be cautious, however, when comparing results within your district or across districts.

Tell what will be done with the results. Indicate the district's plan to work on the weak areas found in the report, as well as to develop the strengths discovered. Explain what administrators, teachers, and others plan to do with the results.

Take the testing story to targeted groups.
Don't expect the news media to do the entire job of public reporting. There are important audiences to reach in other ways, such as through in-person presentations, special written reports, or meetings. After test results have been reported, make a special effort to communicate the results to community opinion leaders in these ways.

Summary

The importance of quickly and accurately reporting results cannot be overemphasized. The strategies suggested in this chapter emphasize the need to preplan a comprehensive reporting campaign that uses the media to reach many important audiences, particularly through the background report and the results report. Although this is not the only approach to reporting you can use, it helps to focus attention on the instructional uses of assessment programs. This in turn may help avoid the use of assessment programs as the sole external evaluation of school systems, which is a misuse of the assessment information. This comprehensive reporting approach can also help ensure that the results are used to improve student learning, the most frequently cited purpose for assessment programs.

References

Barber, B. (1992, Spring). Policies for reporting test results to parents. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practices;-11*(1), 15–20.

Caswell, M. S., & Roeber, E. (1983a). *Reporting test results to the board.* Lansing, MI: Michigan Department of Education.

Caswell, M. S., & Roeber, E. (1983b). *Reporting test results to the public.* Lansing, MI: Michigan Department of Education.

Coleman, G. J. (1983). *Reporting test results to parents.* Lansing, MI: Michigan Department of Education.

Frechtling, J. A., & Myerberg, N. J. (1983, December). *Reporting test scores to different audiences.* Princeton, NJ: ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation.

Gucwa, B., & Mastie, M. (1989). *Pencils down: A guide to using and reporting testing results.* Lansing, MI: Michigan Department of Education.

Perlman, C. L. (1985, April). *Reporting test results to the public: Exploring the doughnut.* Paper presented at the 1985 National Council on Measurement in Education Annual Meeting.

Roeber, E., & Carr, R. (1983). *Using and reporting test results: Steps in the right direction.* Lansing, MI: Michigan Department of Education.

Roeber, E., Donovan, D., & Cole, R. (1980, December). Telling the statewide testing story . . . and living to tell it again. *Phi Delta Kappan, 62*(4), 273–274.

Roeber, E. D., & Mastie, M. (1999). *Steps in the right direction: A guide to using and reporting assessment results.* Dover, NH: Measured Progress.

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

	This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.
X	This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").